

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L BEIRUT 2998

EXDIS, FROM CHARGE

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: MARR, PEPR, IS, PLO, LE, SY
SUBJ: THE LEBANESE ARMY: VIEWS OF PRIME MINISTER HOSS

1. DURING MY CALL ON PRIME MINISTER HOSS ON MAY 30, HE DISCUSSED THE FUTURE OF THE LEBANESE ARMY AND ITS POSSIBLE ROLE IN SOUTH LEBANON.

2. HOSS SAID HE WAS GENERALLY SATISFIED WITH THE PROGRAM THAT GENERAL KHOURY WAS IMPLEMENTING TO REBUILD THE LEBANESE ARMY. GENERAL KHOURY WAS DOING THE JOB THE ONLY WAY IT COULD BE DONE UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES -- BY REEQUIPPING, RETRAINING AND REORGANIZING HIS MEN, AND DOING WHAT HE COULD TO GET MORE MUSLIMS INTO SENIOR RANKS AND THEREBY CONVINCE THE MUSLIM POPULATION THAT THE NEW LEBANESE ARMY WOULD BE A TRULY NATIONAL FORCE. THE MAIN PROBLEM, HOSS SAID, WAS THAT PROGRESS WAS TOO SLOW. TIME WAS NOT ON LEBANON'S SIDE IN THIS MATTER BECAUSE, INTER ALIA, THE GOL NEEDED A RELIABLE NATIONAL ARMY TO TAKE CONTROL
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IN SOUTH LEBANON VERY SOON. HOSS SAID THAT SPEAKING PERSONALLY AND UNOFFICIALLY HE BELIEVED THERE WERE TWO STEPS THE GOL HAD TO TAKE TO SPEED UP THE REBUILDING PROCESS. FIRST, IT MUST EXERCISE THE SPECIAL POWERS WHICH IT NOW HAS BUT WHICH EXPIRE ON JUNE 30 TO GET RID OF ALL THE OFFICERS IN THE ARMY WHO COULD NOT MAKE A POSITIVE CONTRIBUTION TO THE REBUILDING PROCESS. NO ATTEMPT SHOULD BE MADE, HE SAID TO SINGLE OUT ANY

SPECIFIC OFFICERS FOR BLAME BECAUSE OF THE ROLE THEY HAD PLAYED DURING THE 75-76 FIGHTING; BUT ONLY THOSE WHO COULD HELP BUILD A NEW NATIONAL ARMY SHOULD BE RETAINED.

3. HOSS SAID THAT THIS WEEDING OUT OF THE OFFICER CORPS WOULD HAVE THE ADDITIONAL BENEFIT OF PROVIDING A CONVENIENT WAY TO GET RID OF MAJOR HADDAD AND CAPTAIN SHIDIAC. HE RECOGNIZED THAT THESE TWO OFFICERS WERE EXTREMELY CONTROVERSIAL; SOME LEBANESE (AND ALL PALESTINIANS) CONSIDERED THEM TRAITORS, WHILE OTHER LEBANESE CONSIDERED THEM HEROES. THEY COULD NOT THEREFORE BE SINGLED OUT FOR SPECIAL TREATMENT BUT HOSS THOUGHT IT WOULD BE APPROPRIATE AND FEASIBLE TO RETIRE THEM IF THEY WERE PART OF A GROUP THAT INCLUDED OTHER OFFICERS WHO WERE IDENTIFIED WITH BOTH SIDES. ONCE THESE TWO WERE REMOVED, HE SAW NO REASON WHY THE CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS IN THE SOUTH COULD NOT BE REINTEGRATED INTO THE LEBANESE ARMY JUST LIKE FORMER MEMBERS OF THE LEBANESE ARAB ARMY OR THOSE WHO HAD FOUGHT WITH BARAKAT'S CHRISTIAN ARMY.

4. THE SECOND STEP THAT MUST BE TAKEN TO REBUILD A NATIONAL ARMY, HOSS SAID, IS TO MAKE A DECISION ON A NEW ARMY LAW. THE PRESENT ARMY WAS DOMINATED BY CHRISTIAN OFFICERS. GENERAL KHOURY WAS TAKING STEPS TO IMPROVE THE BALANCE, BUT PROGRESS WAS MUCH TOO SLOW. A NEW ARMY LAW WAS NEEDED THAT WOULD GIVE LEBANESE MUSLIMS A FEELING OF CONFIDENCE THAT THEY ARE GETTING AN EVEN BREAK IN THIS KEY NATIONAL INSTITUTION.
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5. HOSS EMPHASIZED THAT HE WAS SPEAKING "PERSONALLY" AND "CONFIDENTIALLY" AND THAT THE GOVERNMENT (PRESUMABLY MEANING PRESIDENT SARKIS AND THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE CABINET) WERE NOT AGREED ON THESE STEPS.

6. IN RESPONSE TO MY QUESTION, HOSS SAID THAT THE LEBANESE ARMY WOULD HAVE TO GO SOUTH EVENTUALLY TO TAKE CONTROL OF THE COUNTRY, BUT THAT IT COULD NOT DO SO NOW. IF UNITS OF THE PRESENT LAF TRIED TO GO SOUTH, HE SAID, THE PALESTINIANS AND THE LEBANESE LEFT WOULD ASK WHY ARE THEY GOING -- TO REINFORCE HADDAD? -- AND MIGHT TRY TO STOP THEM BY FORCE. EVEN IF LAF UNITS COULD BE SUCCESSFULLY INTRODUCED INTO SOUTH LEBANON, THERE IS GREAT DANGER, HOSS SAID, THAT THEY WOULD EITHER FIGHT HADDAD OR JOIN HIM. EITHER OUTCOME WOULD BE A DISASTER FOR LEBANON. ALTHOUGH HOSS DID NOT SPECIFICALLY SAY SO, HE CLEARLY INDICATED THAT IN HIS VIEW THE PROBLEM OF THE FUTURE OF HADDAD AND SHIDIAC WOULD HAVE TO BE SOLVED BEFORE THE LAF CAN MOVE SOUTH.

7. COMMENT: HOSS' REMARKS INDICATE TO WHAT AN EXTENT THE PROBLEM OF MOVING LEBANESE ARMY UNITS TO THE SOUTH HAS BECOME

THE TOUCHSTONE OF THE ENTIRE LEBANESE POLITICAL PROBLEM. BECAUSE HOSS IS A SUNNI MUSLIM AND THE PRIME MINISTER IN LEBANON HAS ALWAYS BEEN EXPECTED TO REFLECT THE VIEWS OF THE SUNNI COMMUNITY, AND BECAUSE PRESIDENT SARKIS HAS USED HIM AS HIS MAIN NEGOTIATOR WITH THE PALESTINIANS, HOSS HAS INCREASINGLY BECOME THE SPOKESMAN FOR PALESTINIAN AND LEBANESE MUSLIM VIEWS IN THE INNER CIRCLE OF THE GOL. HIS COMMENTS SUGGEST THAT HE, BOUTROS, SARKIS AND PERHAPS OTHERS IN THE CABINET, WHO ARE NOT WORKING AS A TEAM BUT AS REPRESENTATIVES OF DIFFERENT CONSTITUENCIES IN LEBANON, ARE STILL DEEPLY DIVIDED ON THE QUESTION OF HOW TO SOLVE SOME OF LEBANON'S BASIC PROBLEMS. UNTIL SOME DECISIONS ARE MADE ON THE BASIC QUESTIONS THAT HOSS DISCUSSED, IT IS DIFFICULT TO SEE HOW THE GOL CAN REASSERT ITS SOVEREIGNTY IN THE SOUTH OR ANYWHERE ELSE IN LEBANON. THE PROBLEM OF THE

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ROLE AND COMPOSITION OF THE LEBANESE ARMY IS LIKELY TO BECOME AN INCREASINGLY CONTENTIOUS ISSUE BETWEEN NOW AND JUNE 30, WHEN THE GOVERNMENT'S SPECIAL POWERS TO FORCE RETIREMENT OF ARMY OFFICERS EXPIRES.

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